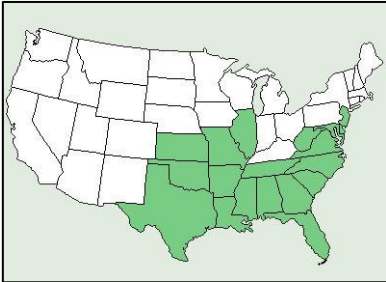




## Just the Facts...

### Atlantic Poison Oak



**Range.** Atlantic poison oak occurs in all the coastal states from New Jersey south to Florida, west to Texas, as well as Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and West Virginia (shaded states).

Atlantic poison oak grows as a shrub, and is found in all the coastal states from New Jersey south to Florida, west to Texas, as well as Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and West Virginia. It thrives in sandy soil conditions, and is commonly encountered in forests, thickets, and open fields. Plants are poisonous at all times of the year and at all stages of growth. All parts of the plant, except the pollen, contain urushiol, a toxin that causes irritation and blistering of the skin. To cause injury, urushiol must contact the skin, either directly by touching the plant, or indirectly by touching things that have touched the plant such as clothing, tools, animals, or firewood. Although some skin-applied products are marketed that claim to protect against or reduce the severity of dermatitis, the best prevention is to learn to recognize Atlantic poison oak and always avoid it.

#### Q. What does Atlantic poison oak look like?

A. Atlantic poison oak (*Toxicodendron pubescens* P. Mill.), also known as “oakleaf ivy” or “oakleaf poison ivy”, is a woody, perennial plant that occurs as a low-growing shrub (average height, 2-4 feet, maximum, 10 feet). It does not climb as a vine. Stems generally grow upright.

Leaflets occur in threes, and are variable in size and shape. The middle leaflet usually is lobed alike on both margins and resembles a small oak leaf, while the two lateral leaflets are often irregularly lobed. Each leaflet is about 6 inches long, shiny above, velvety beneath. Leaves are generally bright green in the spring (or bronze when first unfolding), yellow-green to reddish in the summer, and bright red or pink in the fall. Small yellow-white flowers develop into greenish white or tan colored berries, arranged in slender, axillary (where leaf stems meet the branches) clusters. Plants are reproduced from seeds in the fruit, and sprouts from creeping rootstocks.



**Habitat and Growth Habits.** Atlantic poison-oak grows as a shrub usually 2 to 4 feet in height (right). Plants can be encountered in forests, thickets, and dry, sandy fields. It is one of the first shrubs to recolonize areas after wildfires (left).

#### Q. Where am I likely to encounter Atlantic poison oak?

A. Atlantic poison oak occurs in all the coastal states from New Jersey south to Florida, west to Texas, as well as Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and West Virginia. Plants are most commonly found growing on sandy soils in woods, thickets, and areas disturbed by lumbering, fire, or cultivation.



**Recognizing Atlantic Poison Oak.** Leaves of Atlantic poison oak are compound, consisting of 3 leaflets, each about 6 inches long, shiny above, velvety beneath (left, top). The leaflets are lobed, and resemble leaves of a white oak seedling. Leaves are generally bright green in the spring, and yellow-green to reddish in the summer (right). Flowers are arranged in clusters on small branches, and these develop into greenish-white or tan berries (left, bottom).

#### Q. Why is it important not to come in contact with Atlantic poison oak?

A. All parts of Atlantic poison oak plants, except the pollen, contain a toxic, oily substance, called urushiol (pronounced "you-ROO-shee-ol"). It is present in the plant throughout the year. Urushiol causes irritation and blistering of the skin. To cause dermatitis, the oil must contact the skin, either directly by touching the plant, or indirectly by touching things that have touched the plant such as gloves or other clothing, tools, animals, water, or firewood. The dermatitis is apparently an anaphylactic reaction; that is, it occurs only after sensitization by previous exposure. Individual sensitivity can vary from extreme susceptibility to near immunity. Dermatitis usually appears within 12 to 24 hours, but may appear in as little to 3 or 4 hours or be delayed for several days.

**Q. What can I do if I suspect that my skin or clothes have been exposed to urushiol?**

**A.** After contact with urushiol, it usually takes a little while for it to penetrate the skin. Washing thoroughly within 5-10 minutes after contact can significantly reduce the likelihood/severity of dermatitis. Wash the exposed skin with soap and cold water, followed with rubbing alcohol or a solution of water and alcohol in equal proportions to dissolve the unabsorbed urushiol. Rinse thoroughly, since this solution only flushes away the poison, and does not inactivate it. Urushiol can remain active on contaminated clothing, bedding, tools, and other surfaces for years. Ordinary hot temperature laundering will usually get rid of urushiol on fabrics. Thoroughly rinse with water any contaminated tools or equipment.



**Contact Dermatitis.** Symptoms such as skin itchiness, swelling, inflammation, and the formation of blisters usually appear within 12 to 24 hours after contact with the sap of Atlantic poison oak.

**Q. How can I protect myself against the dermatitis caused by Atlantic poison oak?**

**A.** The best prevention is recognition of Atlantic poison oak plants and appropriate avoidance. Barrier creams containing 5% bentoquatam are the only FDA-approved, skin-applied products that have been proven to protect against or reduce the severity of the rash caused by Atlantic poison oak, when applied at least 15 minutes prior to exposure.

**Q. What are some of the common myths associated with Atlantic poison oak?**

FICTION		FACT
You can become immune to the effects of Atlantic poison oak by eating the leaves.	→	Immunity not conferred by eating any plant part; ingestion can cause serious gastric disturbance.
The rash from Atlantic poison oak is contagious; breaking the blisters will spread the rash.	→	Blisters contain only body fluids; they cannot spread the rash on the skin or to other people.
You can develop a rash from Atlantic poison oak simply by being near the plants.	→	Rash results only if urushiol touches skin; airborne contact is possible if burning/mowing plants.
It is safe to handle dead plants or dormant plants during the wintertime.	→	Plants are poisonous year-round; urushiol stays active on surfaces and in dead plants for 2 years.
If you don't develop a rash after touching Atlantic poison oak once, then you must be immune.	→	First exposure seldom produces rash; sensitivity can change with age and repeated exposure.

**Q. How can I eliminate Atlantic poison oak from my property?**

**A.** The presence of Atlantic poison oak should not be tolerated around child day care facilities or schools, and can be a significant nuisance when present in the landscaping outside dwellings and workplaces. Consult with Preventive Medicine Activity personnel at your supporting clinic to identify suspect plants found around a building. Seek the assistance of the Installation Pest Control Office before applying herbicides for Atlantic poison oak control.

**Nonchemical Approaches.** Young shoots can be repeatedly mowed/cut until the energy stored in the roots is exhausted and the plants die. Roots can be dug up and pulled out of the soil. All the roots must be removed to achieve eradication. Dispose of plant parts where they cannot contaminate people or animals. Never try to destroy Atlantic poison oak with fire. When an Atlantic poison oak plant is burned, urushiol goes into the air on the dust and soot in smoke, and this can result in an allergic reaction in the eyes and respiratory tract or on the skin.

**Chemical Approaches.** Herbicide products that contain the active ingredient glyphosate or triclopyr are two of the most effective tools for Atlantic poison oak elimination around a property. Sprays must contact the leaves to be effective. However, care must be exercised when using these herbicides, since most shrubs, broadleaf ground covers, or herbaceous garden plants which are contacted by the sprays will be killed. Herbicides may not provide 100% control from a single application, and repeat applications to treat regrowth may be necessary.

**References:**

- Grace, P. and Lowe, S.** 2003. Identification of Poison Ivy, Poison Oak and Poison Sumac in Florida. Circular ENH886, Environmental Horticulture Department, FL Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, Univ. of FL.
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